You all probably know that Jefferson, that inveterate designer, even designed his own tombstone, and specified the only things it was to say about his life: that he wrote the Declaration and Virginia's Statute of Religious Freedom, and that he was Father of the University of Virginia. Of how many other men can it be said that their having served two full terms as President of the United States—which I think we all agree is no shabby achievement!—was in the second or third tier of their accomplishments?

Some will object that all this praise fails to do justice to the flaws in our subject. And that is true enough. Should we then begin, as is overwhelmingly the fashion today, by emphasizing Jefferson's complexity, his contradictions, his shortcomings? That might not seem very charitable, or in keeping with the spirit of the occasion. But it would have the Jeffersonian virtue of honesty. And there are negative aspects of Jefferson's life and career that simply cannot be denied.

No one can deny that although Jefferson opposed slavery in theory, he consistently failed to oppose it in practice, including notably in the conduct of his own life at Monticello.

No one can deny that Jefferson's racial views, particularly as expressed in his book Notes on the State of Virginia, are appalling by today's standards.

No one can deny that Jefferson often practiced a very harsh brand of politics. His famously conciliatory words ''We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists'' in his First Inaugural Address were quickly belied by his ferocious partisanship, which was relentlessly aimed at stigmatizing the Federalist party and driving it out of existence.

Nor can one deny that his greatest act as President, the Louisiana Purchase, and his worst, the Embargo Act, both represented a complete repudiation of his most basic principles about the dangers of big government and strong executive authority.

These are not small flaws, nor are they the only ones. We are not wrong to insist upon their being remembered, even on this day. Still, the compulsion to criticize Jefferson has gone too far. Jefferson is, I believe, one of the principal victims of our era's small-minded rage against the very idea that imperfect men can still be heroes—and that we badly need such heroes. We have been living through an era that feels compelled to cut the storied past down to the size of the tabloid present. Perhaps the time has come for that to change.

For when all is said and done, Thomas Jefferson deserves to be remembered and revered as a great intellect and great patriot, whose worldwide influence, from Beijing to Lhasa to Kiev to Prague, has been incalculable, and whose belief in the dignity and unrealized potential to be found in the minds and hearts of ordinary people is at the core of what is greatest in the American democratic experiment. It is in this sense that James Parton was absolutely correct in making the following proclamation: ''If Jefferson is wrong, America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson was right.''

Of course, we want to know more than Jefferson's words; we want to feel that we know the man himself. But that is exceptionally hard with Jefferson. He eludes our grasp. He may well have been the shyest man ever to occupy the office of President, awkward and taciturn except in small and convivial settings, such as small dinner parties, where he could feel at his ease, and shed some of his reticence.

He loathed public speaking, giving only two major speeches while President, and none on the campaign trail. He often felt that the work of politics ran against his nature, and complained that the Presidency was an office of ''splendid misery,'' which ''brings nothing but increasing drudgery & daily loss of friends.''

Add to that the fact that he had more than a little bit of the recluse in him. Twice he withdrew entirely from public life, first in the 1780s, after a disappointing term as governor of Virginia, then the second time at the conclusion of his presidency, when he left Washington disgusted and exhausted, anxious to be rid of the place. As he wrote a friend, ''Never did a prisoner, released from his chains, feel such relief as I shall on shaking off the shackles of power.'' Never was he happier than when ensconced in his Monticello retreat, his ''portico facing the wilderness'' that he loved and found renewal in.

At bottom, I think Jefferson is best understood as a man of letters. Literally. Jefferson wrote almost 20,000 letters in his lifetime, and it is in these letters that he seems to have felt freest and most fully himself. Although he complained to John Adams that he suffered ''under the persecution of letters,'' the opposite seems to have been the case. This was a man who lived much of his life inside his own head, and it is in these letters that he comes most fully alive for us. He seems to have needed the buffer of letters interposed between himself and the world; but with that buffer in place, the otherwise awkward and taciturn Jefferson became more open, wonderfully expressive and responsive to his correspondents.

It was in his letters to Maria Cosway that we glimpse his passionate nature, and the struggles between head and heart that preoccupied much of his inner life. It is in his letters to his nephew Peter Carr that we see his thoughts as a preceptor and wise guide to the world's ways. And it was in his magnificent correspondence with his old rival John Adams, a dialogue that spanned fifty years until their deaths in 1826, that Jefferson most fully explored the deeper meaning of the American experiment. He was constantly using his correspondence to organize and sharpen his thinking, and it is there that we see him most fully and vividly.

In any event, it is for his ideas, above all else, that we honor Jefferson; and for the cause of human freedom and human dignity that he so eloquently championed. His failings may weigh against the man, but not against the cause for which he labored so mightily. That should be a lesson to us today. Like Jefferson, we are carriers of meanings far larger than we know, meanings whose full realization cannot be achieved in our lifetime, or even be fully understood by us, but which we are nevertheless charged to carry forward as faithfully as we can.

But unlike Jefferson, we have the benefit of being able to stand on his shoulders, with his words to direct and inspire us. ''We knew'' about Jefferson's faults, said the civil rights leader, Representative John Lewis. ''But we didn't put the emphasis there. We put the emphasis on what he wrote in the Declaration. . . . His words were so powerful. His words became the blueprint, the guideline for us to follow. From those words you have the fountain.''

It is the same fountain that today, 265 years after Jefferson's birth, still nourishes our lives, and shows no sign of running dry. Today is a good day to drink from it anew.

125TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE NATIONAL CRITTENTON FOUNDATION

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, today marks the 125th anniversary of The National Crittenton Foundation, the nationwide organization that supports empowerment, self-sufficiency, and an end to cycles of destructive behavior and relationships by at-risk girls and young women. The organization began as the National Florence Crittenton Mission, founded in 1883 by 19th century philanthropist Charles Crittenton of New York City a year after his daughter Florence died at the age of 5. His goal was to assist girls and young women in trouble, and in the years that followed, Florence Crittenton Homes became famous in communities across the United States and in foreign countries as well.

One of the leading members of the Foundation today is the Crittenton Women's Union in Boston, which began as a Florence Crittenton Home in the city in 1896. It was launched by a pioneering group of women activists who wanted it to be a ''big sister'' to ''unfortunate New England girls'' young unmarried mothers in need of shelter and moral guidance.

In the years that followed these two organizations joined forces and combined with other organizations to create the Crittenton Women's Union, which today empowers low-income women in our city by providing safe housing, caring support services, education, and workforce development programs.

In addition to using its on-the-ground experience to shape public policy and achieve social change, Crittenton Women's Union is also Massachusetts' largest provider of transitional housing for homeless mothers and their children and the founder of New England's first transitional home for victims of domestic violence. The organization continues its innovative approach to today's compelling social problems through its focus on workforce development and post-secondary school training to enable women to become economically self-sufficient.

Its services are further strengthened by its unique partnership with the National Crittenton Foundation, which gathers valuable insights from its nationwide network of frontline agencies and provides a forum to share best practices and shape national policies to benefit all young women and girls at risk.

Today, 125 years after Charles Crittenton began his historic work as a an agent for positive change for young women and girls, Crittenton Women's Union and the National Crittenton foundation remain true to his vision. I welcome this opportunity to commend the Foundation and its extraordinary members on this special anniversary for their continuing vision and commitment to their goals in Massachusetts and throughout the Nation.

TRIBUTE TO YVONNE BRATHWAITE BURKE

Mrs. FEINSTEIN. Mr. President, today I honor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, who is retiring at the end of 2008, after a distinguished and illustrious career spanning 50 years as a